

ECUMENISM, EVANGELISM, AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

By Paul Mojzes

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Fr. Leonid Kishkovsky, current president of the Europe Committee of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and the ecumenical officer of the American Orthodox Church, describes in his lectures and writings the situation of the Russian Orthodox Church's transition from the Soviet period to contemporary Russia by drawing a picturesque analogy with the biblical Exodus. He characterizes this transition "from captivity into the desert." Thereby he describes a change from fear to insecurity. The fear was caused by the oppression and attempts at annihilation of the church by the former Soviet regime, while the insecurity is caused by the desert-like devastation and barrenness when the church knows not which way to the Promised Land. Kishkovsky's image applies more broadly to all churches in the former Soviet Union and, indeed, more broadly to nearly all church organizations in all former socialist countries of Eastern Europe. The analogy applies down to the nostalgia for the certainties of an oppressive situation and the rebelliousness of segments of the people against the freedom of the present situation due to their inability to cope with insecurity. It is this context within which the dramatic interplay of ecumenism, evangelism, and religious liberty is working out that is examined in the collection of essays assembled in this issue.

During the communist period, the relationship among the churches of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union appeared to be characterized by the general absence of vitriolic mutual animosity, and often one might have used the word "tolerance" and sometimes even "cordiality" to describe their attitudes. Ecumenism seemed prevalent as one had occasion to witness not only the meetings between church leaders but also the establishment of national councils of churches and the joining of most of the prominent non-Catholic church bodies with the World Council of Churches. Many expected that these ecumenical relationships would flower once the heavy government surveillance and intrusion into church life would cease.

The postcommunist reality is quite different.¹ Joseph Loya, an American Augustinian priest, has described it as an "ecumenical meltdown."² Churches that on the surface used to maintain good relationships, at least on the level of their leadership, now disrupted their contacts, saying that only in the distant future might they be able to enter into ecumenical dialogue. Some church bodies, such as the Evangelical-Baptists in the former Soviet Union, splintered--some on account of theological and organizational disputes, others because of new political boundaries that separated them into new organizational entities. Mutual suspicion and hostility characterize the new relationship between church bodies, sometimes even leading to physical violence, perhaps nowhere as pronounced as in Ukraine.³ Many of the conflicts are downright embarrassing and scandalous.

This "ecumenical meltdown" was further enhanced by the evangelistic activities of many churches and church groups under the newly liberalized government policies in all Eastern European and former Soviet countries. A veritable torrent of such churchly and parachurchly activities were undertaken not only by the old ecclesial communities, sometimes stepping on each others' toes in areas of unclarified jurisdictions, but also by a large number of relatively new Christian and non-Christian groups who felt it their task and opportunity to enter areas in which previously they were not allowed to operate or were operating clandestinely. These evangelistic activities provoked a predictably alarmist reaction by the historically dominant church bodies that interpreted these actions as raids upon their membership. The purpose of this introductory essay and those that follow is to analyze this situation.

How "Ecumenical" Was Ecumenism during the Communist Period?

A closer look at the ecumenism that was practiced in the communist period will indicate that what melted down may not have been a healthy ecumenism in the first place.

First, the ecclesial existence under communism was not a normal existence. Many actions of the churches were not freely undertaken but were either coerced by the government or undertaken as a defensive measure for purposes of survival. Currently, many people have taken an anti-ecumenical stance because they charge that "ecumenism" was communist-sponsored. While this is an exaggeration, there is also some truth in that claim; namely, the communist governments preferred to deal with fewer and more centrally controlled churches or associations of churches in order to have easier surveillance and command over the religious communities. Hence, they sometimes coerced church leaders and their institutions into unions (for example, the forcible merger of Eastern Rite Catholics or Uniates with the Orthodox Church in the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Romania; or the merger of Baptists, Evangelicals, Mennonites, and Pentecostals into the All-Union Evangelical-Baptist Council in the U.S.S.R.) or into ecumenical councils upon which they often imposed leadership just as they did upon many denominations. The leadership of these merged bodies or ecumenical agencies were individuals who were acceptable to the government and malleable to directives issued; in a few extreme cases the secret services had infiltrated the leadership and directly controlled church activities. The leaders of these ecumenical agencies then had to do a twofold task for the government. At home they had to keep everyone in line so that the government would dole out a few minor privileges rather than even more severely repressing the constituency. Abroad they had to toe the official line of their government, proclaiming that in their country true religious freedom existed and that their churches unanimously supported their country's policies.⁴ Intense suspiciousness developed consequently between many church-goers and segments of this so-called "ecumenical" leadership, and they confided this dissatisfaction to whoever would listen. When freedom finally came, many of them decided to cut themselves off from such leaders and rejected the very notion of ecumenism.⁵

Second, much of Eastern European ecumenism was "protocol ecumenism." That is, occasionally church leaders would gather for "photo opportunities" and exchange pleasantries for each others' holidays. Whenever such occasions were featured in the official media, it was inevitably stressed how grateful the churches were to live under such benevolent communist regimes. This "protocol ecumenism" was like the so-called "Potemkin Villages" that hid reality under an artificial facade. In the meantime, little or no real give-and-take on serious social and theological issues occurred.⁶ This means that much of ecumenism was an ecumenism in form but not in substance.

The Return of the Old under New Conditions

It has been noted that the Eastern European transformation of the late 1980's and early 1990's was not a revolutionary turn to something new but primarily a movement looking sideways and backwards. Looking sideways meant wishing to have instantly what they saw in the West--and, since that was generally not achievable, becoming rather disillusioned with the illusory promises. Looking backwards meant that there was a general desire to return to the precommunist period and behave as if the communist period was mostly a bad dream. This meant that most of the churches, particularly the formerly dominant and privileged ones, eagerly sought to return to the "good old times." However, the old times had not necessarily been good for everyone. The less privileged churches or those that had been discriminated against in the past rightfully feared that they might again be marginalized--or worse. The dominant churches sought the return of their expropriated properties and privileges, such as obligatory religious education in schools. The memories of old hostilities were easily resurrected.

The main culprit for the return to the old was the dormant but flickering nationalism. As the Communist ideology waned, there was no other real ideology to replace it but nationalism. The traditional ethnic and religious overlap reasserted itself, and, in this time of crisis and uncertainty when the socialist identity lost its power, the national chauvinistic one was permitted to be fanned into a flame. No sooner did communism implode when nationalism exploded. Armenians and Azeris got into a bloody conflict that was billed as a Christian-Muslim conflict. Romanian Orthodox were pitted against Hungarian Catholics and Protestants. Ukrainian Catholics were bracing for a fight with Orthodox, both Ukrainian and Russian. In the former Yugoslavia the ecumenical efforts of Catholic Croats and Slovenes with the Serbian Orthodox theologians disappeared almost overnight as their nations and churches became engulfed in a series of fratricidal wars, which became only more brutal and complex with the reluctant involvement of the Bosnian Muslims. Polish Roman Catholics never hid their dislike of Orthodox Russians, and that animosity is just one of many pointing to the host of barriers that have been erected in the path of

genuine ecumenism.

Eastern Europe was too secluded to be imbued by the spirit of Vatican II and Pope John XXIII or the ecumenical spirit of Patriarch Athenagoras I--thus the path to anti-ecumenism was that much shorter. Dominant churches and nationalities returned the treatment of religious and national minorities to where it always used to be in Eastern Europe and tsarist Russia: one of repression and denial of social and legal equality. The principle in Poland is that if you are a real Pole you must be a Catholic. The same obtains in Croatia, Slovenia, Lithuania, and Slovakia. Its equivalent can be encountered in Russia: a true Russian--even if nonreligious or anti-religious--is still counted upon as being Orthodox. A Serbian Orthodox priest announced in Bosnia on the local television that only Orthodox Serbs are real Serbs; nonpracticing ones are only half-Serbs, while atheists are not even human. Such views may not be expressed so bluntly elsewhere, but "true" Bulgarians, Romanians, and Greeks are believed to be legitimately only Orthodox.⁷

Evangelism and/or Proselytism?

No one knows the exact number of groups or individuals who have gone east since the fall of communism, but their numbers are staggering. Mark Elliott and Linford Stutzman's essays provide some specific information about the magnitude of this evangelistic endeavor. Not all of these individuals and groups are engaged in explicit proselytism, but many of them are. Even many evangelism-oriented observers admit that many groups and individuals are engaged in irresponsible and insensitive denigration of the local churches, particularly the historically dominant church. They seem to be able to attract a following not merely because of the inherent value of their message but also because of the glitz, the money, and the general attractiveness of the Western lifestyle, as well as the local population's ignorance of their own religious heritage, for they are unable to discern between the traditional religious message and the sometimes outlandish theological innovations presented by some of the groups.

Many of these new evangelists do not recognize the value and legitimacy of the indigenous religious expressions and claim that only membership in their own group will provide salvation. Neither the history nor the culture nor the native language nor the traditional form of Christianity is respected by some of these groups. While it is not likely that many of these missionaries will stay for the long run, and while it is not even likely that they will permanently change the religious landscape in these countries in any decisive way, nevertheless, the dominant churches have reacted with a great deal of alarm to what they consider to be a well-financed invasion.

The Dominant Religious Leadership Seeks to Curb Religious Freedoms

The leadership of the historically dominant churches react fearfully to the evangelistic efforts.⁸ In doing so they often over-react by attempting to convince their own government authorities to limit the religious freedom of groups other than their own. They frequently vilify by painting with broad brush-strokes, categorizing all others as "new religions," sectarians, or "totalitarian cults," even if such minorities had been present in their land for several centuries or decades. During a trip to Russia in October, 1995, I heard a veritable chorus of voices vilifying "totalitarian cults."

Both the "invading sectarians" and the dominant religious institutions engage in mutual anti-ecumenical demonization. The leaders of the dominant church, having had little experience or taste for genuine religious liberty, ask for the curtailment of all activities by groups not their own, because they consider the entire population, without regard for how nonreligious it had become (in Russia about seventy-five percent of men and forty-five percent of women declare themselves nonreligious), as belonging to their church. Therefore, any evangelistic work among this population that does not result directly in the return to the church of their ancestors is considered proselytism. They plead that at a minimum such efforts should be suspended until they are sufficiently strengthened so as to be able to stand on their own after years of communist devastation of their cadres and church properties. Often they appeal to ecumenical bodies of other countries to prevent the sending of missionaries, without understanding that in the West there is no legal mechanism that could lead to such sweeping prohibitions (usually it is not the member churches of these ecumenical bodies who are actively sending missionaries, other than to bolster the work of their own denomination in a given locality).

Seeing that the influx of foreign evangelists is not diminishing leads not only to additional anti-ecumenism by the dominant church but usually to explicit legal efforts to limit or forbid evangelistic activities in their country. Most legislative proposals of that sort have ultimately been halted by those local politicians who fear that this may

endanger Western assistance to their reformist activities. The more nationalist politicians usually are willing to forge alliances with the defensive established church leadership, seeing the evangelistic efforts as simply a larger pattern of corrupt Western influences upon their people.

All in all, the seeming ecumenical progress among the three great branches of Christianity--Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism--and the more specific cooperation within ecumenical agencies such as the World, European, and national councils of churches has been jeopardized by the freedom that was granted after the collapse of communism, with the ultimate result being the weakening of all three factors: ecumenism, evangelization of the unchurched, and religious liberty. All of this contributes to the growing scandal of Christian behavior and to the lessening of the ability to overcome the generally chaotic situation in the former socialist countries. A great deal of concerted action will be needed by church leaders and members East and West to repair the damages already sustained in the short postcommunist period. The first step should be to move from illusory ecumenism, short-sighted proselytism, and provisional religious liberty to the genuine manifestation of all three.

ENDNOTES

1. A certain amount of generalization is inevitable in a work like this. The conclusions do not pertain equally to all countries and all churches.

2. Joseph Loya, "Interchurch Relations in Post-Perestroika Eastern Europe: A Short History of an Ecumenical Meltdown," Religion in Eastern Europe 14 (February, 1994): 1-17.

3. Ibid., pp. 5-7; Patricia Herlihy, "Crisis in Society and Religion in Ukraine," in Religion in Eastern Europe 14 (April, 1994): 8-11; and David Little, Ukraine: The Legacy of Intolerance (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1991).

4. J. A. Hebly, "The Constraints of the World Council of Churches in the Question of the Relationship with Churches from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe," Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe 6 (June, 1986): 4-49.

5. During my visit to L'viv some Pentecostal leaders shared their conviction that the leadership of their denomination was directed by the KGB. Lutheran Bishop László Tökés of Romania sharply criticized the World Council of Churches for accepting at face value the testimony of many Romanian Orthodox Church leaders that there was no oppression under the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu.

6. In July of 1967 this author interviewed Dr. László Papp who was at the time under house arrest; he claimed in no uncertain terms that ecumenism was stagnating or even retreating, because it is against the real interests of the state to have genuine ecumenical advance.

7. For a particularly virulent and poisonous expression of that formula, see Metropolitan Ioann of St. Petersburg, "The West Wants Chaos," in Niels C. Nielsen, Jr., ed., Christianity after Communism: Social, Political, and Cultural Struggle in Russia (Boulder, CO; San Francisco, CA; Oxford: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 107-112.

8. E.g., Lawrence A. Uzzell, "Patriarch Blocks Last-Minute Drive for New Religious-Freedom Law," Keston News Service, December, 1995, pp. 10-11.